

THE IGNATIAN 'EXERCISE' IN DAILY LIFE

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THE EXPRESSION 'Exercises in daily life' is probably already familiar to readers of this article. However, it is normally used by putting into the plural a word which should first of all be understood in the singular. When St Ignatius speaks of an 'exercise' he means a personal act by the retreatant in which the latter 'prepares himself and disposes himself' to receive the grace of God. This action is very precise within the framework of a closed retreat. Here, however, I should like to make a few reflections about its role in the context of a retreat in daily life.

The 'exercise'

Anyone who 'makes the Exercises' in the form of a closed retreat freely submits to a particular type of spiritual activity, the development of which is well-defined: there will be 'five exercises or contemplations' and this rhythm is to be repeated every day (Exx 12), with a time of preparation when the retreatant receives 'a short or summary explanation' (Exx 2), and a period when, once the 'exercise' is over, the person sees 'how the contemplation or meditation has passed' (Exx 77). The actual activity of prayer has a firmly established framework from the preambles to the colloquies. Finally, the many 'notes' or 'Additions' (to use St Ignatius's vocabulary) give even more precise instructions. Undoubtedly all this constitutes advice about how to adapt, modify and create a certain flexibility in relation to the retreatant's life style and temperament. However, a closed retreat has clear structures, and consequently many of those who are used to the thirty day retreat may have some misgivings. They may feel that this type of religious exercise is impossible for retreatants who remain in the context of their ordinary lives, not only because they cannot find enough time for such prayer on a daily basis, but also because their attention is necessarily focused on too many other activities. In the midst of these, their prayer seems to be

in danger of losing its importance and hence its value precisely as an 'exercise'.

In order to overcome this objection, at least in part, one could obviously guide a retreatant towards a method which would give greater significance and meaning to the times which he could devote to prayer, despite his daily activities, in the hope of maintaining the characteristic structure of an 'exercise'. In fact it is not uncommon, in some of the approaches to directing the Exercises in daily life, for prayer to be given a special status as if it offered a privileged context for the most intense spiritual experiences. This, consequently, gives preference to such moments as revealing the true dynamism of the Exercises. Such an approach is not unprofitable, but I think that it is insufficient and rather illusory.

The actual experience of retreats in daily life seems to point our reflections elsewhere. The retreatant starts by slowly learning day by day, in the context of a prayer experience where he discovers the pre-conditions and the laws of progress, how a meeting between the grace of God and the human heart may be brought about. However, from the very start of his experience the retreatant's attentiveness in faith is no longer limited to prayer. Some of his other activities take on a new meaning as he isolates them from the continual and confusing turmoil of his daily life. He learns what attitude he brings to them and realizes more humbly the conditions which are needed (that is, peace and inner truth) in order that his actions, words and undertakings may reveal the meaning they have in the context of his relationship with God. Does this merely apply to important actions? Yes, in the sense that an action must be rich enough to be an expression of the one who is acting. No, in the sense that all actions are potentially revealing to someone who is aware and sensitive. Faced with a difficult or even dangerous undertaking, or when passions are running high, or even faced with a minor decision to do with the value of work or which flatters his vanity, the retreatant discovers that in fact he is carrying out a truly spiritual activity which has a beginning and an end, or, more precisely, a 'beforehand' and an 'afterwards'. A 'beforehand' where one prepares oneself, and an 'afterwards' when one takes note of what has happened. This spiritual activity consists of many different 'movements', some of which arise from the action of different spirits (consolation or desolation) and others from the merely human activities of thinking and feeling. This activity finally arouses an inner dynamism which moves us in the direction of prudence,

withdrawal and peace, and at the same time brings us face to face with the obstacles in our way. This process, which can obviously take place merely on the level of human wisdom, can also become, in the light of faith, the means of discovering what is taking place within oneself when the action is examined in the presence of God.

In this way the retreatant goes through the experience of an 'exercise' which is not directly prayer, though closely allied to it. St Ignatius, in the first sentence of the *Spiritual Exercises*, indicates the process: 'By the term "Spiritual Exercises" is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of vocal or mental prayer, and all other spiritual activities' (Exx 1). In the case of retreatants who are doing the Exercises in daily life, where their efforts consist precisely in transforming ordinary activities into 'spiritual exercises', this can mean all kinds of concrete experiences in their daily lives. Many of the ways in which St Ignatius characterizes the specific activity of prayer maintain their validity when applied to 'these other spiritual activities' which come out of life itself: to find spiritual relish and fruit, to feel and taste things interiorly and to ask for what one seeks. I would insist particularly on the point which St Ignatius himself underlines: 'we call spiritual exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul'. This is very easy to grasp once the retreatant has come to realize that his day is rich in moments when he can prepare and dispose himself to find God in the midst of human activity. St Ignatius makes this more precise: 'preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). It is not the 'Exercises' as a whole which reveal the will of God, but each single 'exercise' in so far as it prepares and disposes the person to free himself and to pledge himself to God in faithfulness. In the course of the Exercises in daily life an enormous vista of spiritual experience is opened up to the retreatant. This vista is made up of enlightenment about courses of action, humility about ways of engaging in activity, and recognition of the grace of God at the centre of human behaviour.

These remarks undoubtedly have to be complemented by some reflection on St Ignatius's 'Additions', that is, his very practical advice 'to help one go through the Exercises better and find more readily what one desires' (Exx 73). Obviously these Additions, which are directly related to the activity of prayer, cannot be applied just as they are to the experiences of ordinary life. Each retreatant,

according to his own temperament and life-style, has to make these practical and simple rules his own in such a way that they will help him more readily to transform his own human activity into a 'spiritual exercise'. These rules can be applied to sleep, food, the details of the daily time-table, to the means of retaining or regaining a certain balance, to the demands of relaxation and leisure, to the way one listens and responds, and to the process of reflecting on some important activity in order to grow in understanding of what has taken place. Individual retreatants need to decide for themselves what would be helpful in order to spiritualize their activities.

Experiments

For St Ignatius, the idea of an 'exercise' implies 'testing' in the sense that one tests or tries out one thing and then another in order to determine which is best in the particular circumstances. Through this testing a person begins to realize the direction in which God is leading him: whether to shorten or lengthen times of prayer; whether to vary the pattern of prayer throughout the day; whether to centre on the desire of his heart in order to lay it before God, or to set it aside to make room for another; whether to be ready to be led along one road or another, and to seek for the results of an inner search in order to let himself be led by grace.

In closed retreats this attitude of active availability and of attentiveness is applied to all aspects of prayer, penance, the demands of sleep and of hunger, the guidance of a director, the elements needed to make an election — in short, to the places where actions are in harmony or disharmony with those of God. The retreatant slowly discovers 'what he needs', that is, what brings him peace and inner unity, at that point where conclusions about life and the flow of his prayer are unified in an act which has as much to do with adoration and offering as with practical decisions about everyday life and its demands. The process of the Exercises leads to a certain passivity which leaves the person at rest and open to God from the moment when he has found his own way of silence and presence. This is the experience to which each retreatant is led during the retreat. The director provides support precisely by helping the person to see how, by means of various 'tests', a direction develops which unites all the elements of his personality in the Spirit. Many serious decisions are prepared for in this way by the gradual coming together of many desires into one desire which is the 'vocation' that God is testing through the various attempts to give oneself to God in complete trust.

All the richness of the ignatian experience is present during the Exercises in daily life, but with an important difference. Outside the times of prayer (where everything that St Ignatius said about prayer maintains its validity) it is life itself, meetings with other people, and the attitude one seeks to adopt which give rise to those inner movements in which the retreatant hopes to find what God desires for him. 'Now since God our Lord knows our nature infinitely better, when he makes changes of this kind he often grants each one the grace to understand what is suitable for him' (Exx 89). These may be changes which the retreatant desired concerning areas of his life where he was looking for a solution from within himself. For example, his attitude to his wife and children, the way to behave in his professional life, or the question of how much of his life should be given to selfless service. It is not a question of looking for a carefully worked out structure for living in order to find balance and truth. This is not, of course, to be excluded. However, the fundamental aim is to create a 'spiritual exercise' which will be the occasion of seeing how God leads a person through the various reactions which come to light in consciousness. These reactions include both the coherent and the unreconciled elements which arise and which have to be unified — but neither by a mere effort of will nor by mere whim.

St Ignatius speaks of 'changes' to be introduced because in the different 'exercises' he is trying to show, by successive approximations, the value of human initiative in this search. If the exterior circumstances bring the retreatant to some decisive change without any effort on his part, he would clearly have to accept this and try to live it spiritually. However, this is not, it seems to me, the educative point of the 'exercises'. The latter consists rather in various attempts to recognize whatever is a means of finding God in the whole of life including prayer. In certain cases it will be necessary to face things for which we feel repugnance or which we fear (Exx 157), but even here the only thing that matters is to grow in inner freedom in order to become more available to God.

It seems to me that, through the Exercises in daily life, the retreatant will find himself engaged in a very important inner adventure. Perhaps the intensity of 'states' of prayer is less pronounced than in closed retreats. However, it is certain that when the experience of the Exercises is based not on desires but on actions, and when it gathers together all the realities of life so that each person can discover in these 'what is suitable for him', it is already a

means towards a change of heart which brings with it the enlightenment out of which the election grows at the appropriate moment.

The 'pauses'

Finally I would like to draw attention to a third aspect of the Exercises which can be termed 'pauses', following St Ignatius's own description. In the third exercise of the First Week St Ignatius proposes a 'repetition' for the first time. 'We should pay attention and dwell upon those points in which we have experienced greater consolation and desolation, or greater spiritual appreciation' (Exx 62). He often uses similar words especially when he speaks of repetition and the Application of the Senses in the Fourth Week where 'attention and more time is to be given to the more important parts, and to points where the soul was more deeply moved and the spiritual relish was greater' (Exx 227). 'Giving more time', in ignatian terms, is more accurately expressed as 'making a pause' (*haciendo pausa*). This 'pause' obviously forms part of the prayer. It consists in remaining in certain moments, or dwelling on certain points which stood out during the preceding prayer, and using them as the starting point for further prayer. This way of proceeding in the Exercises is already familiar and helps to build up the life of prayer by creating confidence about our inner feelings which were given to us as signs of grace. But the Exercises in daily life have given a particular significance to these 'pauses'.

First of all the retreatant has to 'call a halt' not only to prayer but also to those times when life itself has given rise to the experience of certain feelings — whether consolations or trials and sufferings. Because their application goes beyond the limited context of prayer, the words used by St Ignatius take on an unexpected richness. They embrace all the actual behaviour of the retreatant, underlining the spiritual meaning of the feelings which affect him in his daily life, including those apparently negative feelings of desolation associated with, for example, difficult marital problems or family circumstances which are hard to bear. The 'most important' points of the Exercises (Exx 227) are effectively the most important points of life (at least those which seem so to the retreatant) and it is to those that he should return more often in prayer.

The trouble is that in the complexity of daily life we cannot always readily identify 'the most important things', nor 'where the soul was most deeply moved'. Very often we need time or leisure to look back on the past and to 'make notes' in the sense of reducing our

experience to its essentials, and to think through what has been confusedly experienced. This is the perspective within which the retreatant is led to set aside 'pauses' in the flow of his retreat. These may be times of greater exterior or inner silence, or opportunities to put his own recollections in order so as to rediscover the pattern of interior movements as well as time to spend with the director so that the discernment of spirits will emerge in dialogue. Such a 'pause' may take the form of a retreat away from everyday life, lasting from several hours to a whole day or week-end. This, however, does not mean moving from a retreat in daily life to a closed retreat by the back door. It is a time when the retreat in daily life becomes clear and is given direction by means of a deeper awareness of all that has happened in the preceeding days, and such a pause only has meaning in so far as it leads to a better discernment, in the light of all that has been experienced so far, of how to submit oneself to the action of the Spirit in the future. This needs underlining to avoid any ambiguity. It seems to me very detrimental to understand these 'pauses' as the kind of silence and activity proper to a closed retreat which would bring about a break in the rhythm. Such pauses, in fact, are meant to build into the Exercises in daily life the conditions for a gradual interiorizing by fidelity to 'those greater spiritual fruits' (Exx 62) which are seen as signs indicating the way to move from exercise to exercise.

These 'pauses' are appropriate moments for judging how the practice of a 'spiritual exercise' should evolve. This evolution will appear not only in prayer itself (where prayer becomes more simple, more unified, and more quiet) but also in the harmony between the times of prayer and the rest of life. Together these will constitute one unique 'time' where a person learns to let himself be led by God in the whole of his activity.¹

NOTE

¹ This article has already appeared in French in the *Bulletin de l'Association de la Bienfaisance*, no 8 (Paris), and in *Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne*, no 26 (Quebec, April-June 1983). We are grateful for permission to reprint it in translation.

ANNOTATIONS EIGHTEEN, NINETEEN AND TWENTY

BECAUSE SEVERAL articles in this *Supplement* have detailed references to the final three Annotations of the Exercises, it seems useful to provide the text for the convenience of readers. The translation used is that of Louis Puhl S.J., which is based on studies in the language of the 'Autograph' spanish version.¹ This is the translation used by many present-day directors of the Exercises.

Annotation 18. The Spiritual Exercises must be adapted to the condition of the one who is engaged in them that is, to his age, education and talent. Thus exercises that he could not easily bear, or from which he would derive no profit, should not be given to one with little natural ability or of little physical strength.

Similarly, each one should be given those exercises that would be more helpful and profitable according to his willingness to dispose himself for them.

Hence, one who wishes no further help than some instruction and the attainment of a certain degree of peace of soul may be given the Particular Examination of Conscience (Exx 24-31), and after that the General Examination of Conscience (Exx 32-43). Along with this, let him be given for half an hour each morning the method of prayer on the Commandments and on the Capital Sins, etc. (Exx 238-248). Weekly confession should be recommended to him, and if possible, the reception of Holy Communion every two weeks, or even better, every week if he desires it.

This method is more appropriate for those who have little natural ability or who are illiterate. Let each of the Commandments be explained to them, and also the Capital Sins, the use of the five senses, the precepts of the Church, and the Works of Mercy.

Similarly, if the one giving the Exercises sees that the exercitant has little aptitude or little physical strength, that he is one from whom little fruit is to be expected, it is more suitable to give him some of the easier exercises as a preparation for confession. Then he should be given some ways of examining his conscience, and directed to confess more frequently than was his custom before, so as to retain what he has gained.

But let him not go on further and take up the matter dealing with the Choice of a Way of Life, nor any other exercises that are outside the First Week. This is especially to be observed when much better results could be obtained with other persons, and when there is not sufficient time to take everything.

Annotation 19. One who is educated, or talented, but engaged in public affairs or necessary business, should take an hour and a half daily for the Spiritual Exercises.

First, the end for which man is created should be explained to him, then for half an hour the Particular Examination of Conscience may be presented, then the General Examination of Conscience, and the method of confessing and of receiving Holy Communion.

For three days, let him meditate each morning for an hour on the first, second and third sins (Exx 45-54). For three more days, at the same time, he should take the meditation on personal sins (Exx 55-61). Then for three days, at the same hour, he should meditate on the punishment due to sin (Exx 65-71). Along with all of these meditations he should be given the Ten Additional Directions (Exx 73-89).

In the mysteries of the life of our Lord, the same order should be observed which is explained later on at great length in the Exercises themselves.

Annotation 20. To one who is more disengaged, and desirous of making as much progress as possible, all the Spiritual Exercises should be given in the same order in which they follow below.

Ordinarily, the progress made in the Exercises will be greater, the more the exercitant withdraws from all friends and acquaintances, and from all worldly cares. For example, he can leave the house in which he dwelt and choose another house or room in order to live there in as great privacy as possible, so that he will be free to go to Mass and Vespers every day without any fear that his acquaintances will cause any difficulty.

There are many advantages resulting from this separation, but the following three are the most important:

First, if in order to serve and praise God our Lord one withdraws from numerous friends and acquaintances and from many occupations not undertaken with a pure intention, he gains no little merit before the Divine Majesty.

Secondly, in this seclusion the mind is not engaged in many things but can give its whole attention to one single interest, that is, to the service of its Creator, and its spiritual progress. Thus it is more free to use its natural powers to seek diligently what it so much desires.

Thirdly, the more the soul is in solitude and seclusion, the more fit it renders itself to approach and be united with its Creator and Lord; and the more closely it is united with Him, the more it disposes itself to receive graces and gifts from the infinite goodness of its God.

NOTE

¹ Puhl, Louis J. S.J. (trans): *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius* (Loyola University Press, Chicago).

For those who are interested in reading the spanish text, see: *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu*, vol 100, 'Exercitia Spiritualia' (Rome, 1969), pp 156-62.